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ABSTRACT

This study sought to provide an opportunity for individuals who have passed their 90th birthday to look back over their life and assess the meaning of it all. Subjects (N=4) were located in the community. Five interviews were conducted with each subject at weekly intervals; each interview lasted about an hour and was recorded on audiotape. Interviews focused on family and childhood; adolescence, association with the opposite sex, starting a career, and marriage; the productive years from age 30 to 70; the present age; and present age and beliefs about death and the role that love had played in the subjects' lives. The results indicated that: (1) all subjects were middle-to-upper middle-class and had been married; (2) all expressed amazement anyone would want to interview them; (3) interviewing techniques had to be modified to accommodate sensory impairment of the subjects; (4) subjects were not able to grasp the concept of daydreams; (5) subjects felt insecure in the interview procedure; (6) an attachment developed between interviewer and subject; and (7) questions were answered frankly as if subjects were relieved to find someone interested in what they had to say. (ABL)

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Interviewing the Nonagenarian

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This is paper one of two papers. See paper two, "Life, Love, and Dreams From the Nineties" by Wright, Wolanin, and Cochran, SWPA, April 1990. For additional information please contact Samuel W. Cochran, Division of Behavioral and Cultural Sciences, University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, TX 78285-0652. Phone (512) 691-4375.

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Interviewing the Nonagenarian

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The aim of our study was clear: to provide an opportunity for individuals who have passed their 90th birthday to look back over life and assess the meaning of it all. The method of reaching our aim was not so clear; in retrospect, our method proved to be a process--a process of insights, modifications and wows! This paper is an account of how we are learning to create an environment for nonagenarians to tell their story.

With the aid of neighbors, churches, social organizations, and retirement communities, locating alert, English-speaking, intelligent individuals who have passed their 90th birthday is not difficult. Early on, when seeking nonagenarians to participate in the study, we learned our study must have face-validity. One of the first things we did was to prepare a seven-page brochure describing our study and ourselves. We identified our educational institutions and research experience, academic rank,

and indicated that the research was approved by the senior author's educational institution. The brochure also contained a 550-word summary, explaining that we would conduct five interviews at weekly intervals; each interview would last about an hour and be recorded on audio-tape.

The first interview focused on the period from birth to teenage and asked questions about his/her family and life as a child; the second interview assisted the subject in recalling events between the ages of 13 and 30--adolescence, association with the opposite sex, starting a career, and marriage; the third interview looked at the productive years--ages 30 to 70--and gave the subject a chance to look back at his/her family, years of work, and plans for retirement; the fourth interview dealt with his/her present age--looking back over life and determining the meaning of it all. We also discussed his/her ambitions, daydreams, and night dreams; the fifth interview also dealt with his/her present age, allowed the subject to take a critical look at his/her beliefs about death and the role that love played in his/her life. Samples of the type of questions that would be asked accompanied the description of each interview.

Gaining the consent of the nonagenarian to be interviewed was not a problem. However, from the beginning, one thing was evident--patience is mandatory. After the initial floundering, we settled on the following procedure to enlist nonagenarians. A member of the research team would explain our study, described above, to someone associated with the prospective interviewee--his/her children, spouse, or friend--then ask to be introduced to the prospective interviewee to explain the project to him/her.

During the orientation session with the prospective interviewee, which lasted from three-quarters of an hour to two hours, we explained the interview process, described above, and answered questions. There was no hidden agenda. We gave the subject a list of questions dealing with demographic information to be answered before the interview. We also provided a list of questions that would be covered during the first interview. Our nonagenarians are busy with social engagements, shopping, doctor appointments, and daily routine; nonetheless, we always managed to find a time for the interview. For subjects living in their homes, the decision for a time to be interviewed was always turned over to a child or spouse. We never dreamed

getting started would be such an involved process; however, we found this procedure improved our relationship with the subjects and the quality of our interviews.

To date, we have completed the entire interview protocol--five interviews--with ten nonagenarians. Our presentation today is based on interviews with only four of these--three men and one woman. Two are 90 years of age, one 92, and the other 97. All of the subjects are English-speaking, and middle-to-upper middle-class Americans. Two of these graduated from college, and two did not finish high school--one completed the fourth grade, and the other the ninth. One of our subjects continues to practice law; one is a retired box factory worker; one is a former banker and insurance salesman; and the other is a retired Air Force Brigadier General and pilot.

All have been married. Two were married twice, with the second marriage occurring late in life after the death of the first spouse. Two are still living with their spouses; one is divorced. Three of the subjects live in the community--two in their own homes in San Antonio, and one in a daughter's home in another state. The other lives in a Continuing Care Retirement Community in San Antonio.

During the orientation interview, each person expressed amazement that anyone wanted to interview him/her. "Why," they responded in a dozen different ways, "I can't see why you would want to know about me. I am just an ordinary person--I have never done anything special." We reminded them that they had lived nearly a hundred years, in two different centuries, and had seen many changes take place in their lifetime. We assured them, "Anything you tell us will be valuable." The prospect of participating in an interview did not frighten them, but they were apprehensive about the value of their contribution.

Only two, who completed the orientation interview, declined to accept our invitation to participate in the study. All subjects, either on tape or in writing, agreed to a consent statement which gave them the right to terminate the interviews any time they wished; they agreed to allow us to use the information they had given, and we agreed not to report anything that would identify them.

Techniques of interviewing are documented, and we followed generic procedure so far as we could. One of our first modifications was to accommodate the sensory impairment--predominately, hearing or sight--of our subjects. We learned to place the

microphone near the interviewee and speak directly to the individual in a clear voice. Due to poor eyesight, some of our nonagenarians could not read. In such cases, someone would read to them--often it was one of us.

We are constantly evaluating and revising our protocol and, from the beginning, knew our questions about daydreams were not on target. Try as we might and try as they might, the subjects were never able to grasp the concept of daydreams. Almost as an aside remark one of us asked, "What would you do if today you received a valid check for ten million dollars?" This hypothetical question was the key! First, he/she would stammer, "Oh, Oh! That would never happen!" After a few seconds she/he would commence, "I would do so and so..., then so and so, and then...." There it was, daydreams galore; after a bit of scrutiny, we knew we had a handle on daydreams and more--a key to their ambitions.

In reflection, we should have picked up from the orientation session that our nonagenarians felt insecure. At the start of every session, and throughout the interview, our subjects would ask, "Am I answering these questions the way you want me to?" They continued, "It does not seem to me that I am telling you very much. Are you sure I am doing

O. K.?" They would insist, "Be sure to tell me if you want me to do anything different." Our reassurance of satisfaction with the quality of their contribution was sufficient to keep the interview going. Usually on the third interview our subject would ask again, "Now, what did you tell me you were going to with these interviews?" We would respond, "We are going to share them with our colleagues, but you will never be identified with your remarks. We are interviewing others who have passed their ninetieth birthday and will use the data in a composite.

By the third interview, we knew an attachment had developed between the interviewer and the nonagenarian--something we never anticipated. As the interviews progressed, sometimes we started with a social occasion, perhaps lunch, and afterward conducted our interview. Departing from the last interview was a bit awkward and was usually accompanied by promises to get together again. During the orientation interview, we offered to provide our subjects with a copy of their audio tapes, as well as a copy of their transcribed interviews. The anticipated delivery of their processed interviews helped to ease the anxiety of terminating the last session. We continue to

explore ways to respond to the attachment that develops between the interviewer and the nonagenarian.

The most unexpected discovery of all was the frankness with which our questions were answered. It was as if our subjects had been keeping things inside of them for nearly a century and were relieved to find someone who was interested in what they had to say. When discussing this phenomenon in one of our team critiques, a team members reminded us, "The art of listening is an act of love." Maybe she is right. When we touched upon the right topic, uninhibited memories flowed--some of these may not have been expressed for a long, long time.